

Getting Away With It

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Constable Wainwright glanced up as door of the small office he shared with five others burst open. This was the moment he'd been dreading ever since he'd finished his report and sent it upstairs to CID. He could tell from the way Detective Inspector Ross was gripping the paperwork that he wasn't pleased and he couldn't blame him.

The DI threw the file across the desk towards the younger man. 'What the hell's this?'

'It's my report on the witness statements from yesterday's shooting, sir.'

'And you think it's complete?'

'It's as complete as I could get it, sir.' Constable Wainwright had just a touch of defiance in his voice.

'So remind me,' the DI's brow furrowed as he pursed his lips and crossed his arms, possibly in response to the younger man's tone, 'How many witnesses were there?'

The constable shifted his gaze downwards, knowing what was coming next. 'Eleven.'

DI Ross put his hands on the desk and lent forward. 'And not one of them saw the guy that did it?'

Constable Wainwright could almost feel his superior's breath on his face. 'They all saw him.'

'And when you say they all saw him ...'

'They were in the room when the shooting happened, sir.'

The DI straightened up again. 'And was it a big room?'

'No, sir. Just your standard church hall.'

'Were any of them drunk or high or anything?'

'No, sir.'

'It wasn't dark in there was it? I mean they weren't watching a film or something like that were they?'

'No, they had the lights on, sir.'

'So they all saw the man walk in, shoot one of them dead and then walk out again?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And the shooter wasn't wearing a mask or a disguise?'

'No, sir.'

'How close were the witnesses?'

Constable Wainwright picked up his notebook and flicked through it. 'Between six and ten feet.'

The DI took a couple of large steps backwards. 'About this far then?'

Constable Wainwright bit his lip nervously before replying. 'Yes, sir. That would be about right.'

So ...' The DI paced around the room for a minute before returning to the constable's desk. He stood there, hands on hips, looming over the younger man. 'So why the hell haven't you done a photofit?'

This was the bit the constable hadn't been looking forward to explaining to those who ranked above him. 'Well ... that's where things get ... errr ... what you might call complicated, sir.'

The DI raised his eyebrows and moved his head ever so slightly forward: other than that he remained motionless. Constable Wainwright took this as a cue to continue. 'All the witnesses agree the gunman was about five eleven tall and had short dark hair with no beard or anything like that. He was dressed in a black leather jacket, the kind that bikers used to wear, black denim jeans and Doc Martins. He held the weapon in his right hand; a semi-automatic by the sounds of it. There's some disagreement as to what exactly he said but it was either "You know who I am, don't you?" or "You know why I'm here, don't you?" or possibly both. There was an accent, possibly south London; almost certainly fake ...'

'Yes. Yes. I know all that from your report,' DI Ross looked like he was about to explode, 'But what did he actually look like?'

'Well ...' The constable rubbed the back of his neck nervously and flicked through his notebook again. 'Nine of them said he definitely wasn't black.' He felt the urge to glance up at the DI to see if he could guess what his superior was thinking but he did his best to resist. 'Four of them thought he was probably white but three others thought he could have been Arabic or Asian or ...' He turned the page. 'Or maybe South American.'

The DI leaned on the desk again, and stared at the constable. 'Thought he was probably white? What sort of a description's that? Surely you either know or you don't.'

Wainwright took a deep breath. 'They were a bit vague on the age too.'

DI Ross slumped into the chair opposite the younger man and massaged his forehead with one hand as if trying to ease a headache. 'Just how vague are we talking about here?'

'Definitely an adult but he could have been anything between twenty and sixty.'

'And none of them could tell you what he looked like?'

'No, sir.'

The DI considered this for a moment. 'That's got to be bullshit! It happened right in front of them. How can they not know what the gunman looked like? Either one of them did it and the others are covering it up or it was someone from outside the group and they're not giving us the description for some reason. One way or another at least some of them must be in on it.'

'I don't think so.'

'And why would that be?'

'It's because of the reason they were there. They were having a meeting.'

DI Ross dropped his head downwards as he folded one arm across his chest and pinched the bridge of his nose with the thumb and fore finger of his other hand. 'They're not twelve-steppers of some kind, are they?'

'No, nothing like that.' Like the DI, Constable Wainwright knew the code of anonymity for groups like AA always made their lives more complicated than they needed to be when it came to investigating crimes. 'It's more like a self-help group.'

'For what?'

'For a condition they all have. It's called ...' The constable consulted his notebook, 'Prosopagnosia.'

The DI leaned forward. 'Proso *what?*'

'Prosopagnosia, sir. They've all got it pretty bad apparently; that's why they have the meetings. It helps them deal with it.'

'And what's the hell's this *prosopagnosia* thing when it's at home?'

'It's also called face blindness, sir.'

'So they're blind?'

'They're not blind. They can see perfectly well; it's just that they don't recognise or remember faces.'

'They *what?*'

'They don't do faces. And it means they're not great at things like age and race too so it explains why they were so vague with those as well.'

The DI lent back and ran his hands through his hair before linking his fingers behind his head. 'So basically you're saying that even though eleven people saw exactly what happened, none of them can tell us what the shooter looked like because of this face blindness thing?'

'That's pretty much what it boils down to, sir.'

'Would any of them be able to recognise the gunman if they saw him again?'

'I asked. They were all pretty certain they wouldn't, sir. The twelve of them have been meeting as a group for the last three years and they

don't even recognise each other unless they're wearing name badges.'

The DI stood up and paced around the room again. 'So we've got eleven eye witnesses and even if we somehow get lucky and find the guy who did it, none of them would be able to pick him out of a line up?'

'That's the gist of it, sir.'

'This is ridiculous!' The DI returned to the desk. 'And you're sure they're not pulling your leg or anything like that?'

'I'm pretty sure, sir.'

'Why?'

'Because the one I spoke to when I first arrived didn't recognise me when I took his statement later and all I'd done was take my hat off. Two of the others managed to confuse me with Constable Hussan.'

A surprised look appeared on the DI's face. 'Hang on, you're white and he's Asian isn't he?'

'Errr ... Middle-eastern, sir. One of them explained it to me. We've got the same hair colour and style, and we were both in uniform.'

DI Ross scratched his head. 'I don't get it.'

'Because they don't recognise faces, they learn to recognise people by other things: hairstyles, the clothes they're wearing, how they walk, the sound of their voice and so on.'

The DI sat down on the chair again and buried his head in his hands. 'And almost everything we do to find and convict a bad guy is based around having an accurate description of their face meaning we're screwed.'

'Pretty much, sir.'

'Christ!' There was silence for almost a minute before DI Ross spoke again. 'I don't know how I'm going to explain this one to the Superintendent.' There was a hint of resignation in his voice.

'I'm glad it's you that has to do that, sir, and not me. This guy's going to get away with shooting someone in a roomful of people – the way I see it, whoever he is he's pretty much committed the perfect crime.'

The DI stood up and straightened his tie. 'Right. I'd better get this over with.'

He picked the constable's report off the desk and he thought about what the younger man had just said: the perfect crime. As he turned and walked away, he allowed a small smile to creep across his face: it most certainly was. It had first occurred to him that it might be when his wife told him about the odd condition one of her work colleagues had and the support group he went to to help him deal with it; he'd started thinking about it in earnest when he found out they were sleeping together; he'd been almost certain of it by the time he'd decided to kill his wife's lover just to punish her for leaving him after all those years.

Now he'd shot him dead in front of all those witnesses and he knew for sure he was going to get away with it.

Author's note: Prosopagnosia, or face blindness, is a real condition and people who have it are unable to recognise others by their facial features. Until quite recently, it was thought to be a rare condition that only occurred because of some kind of damage to the brain. However, in the last few years it has become clear there's a second form where people don't develop it but instead they have it from birth. It's been estimated that around 1% of the population fall into this category. People who have face blindness from birth may never even realise they have it because to them not recognising people by their faces is normal and let's face it, have you ever asked someone how they recognise others?

I was in my late 30s before I realised I had prosopagnosia but looking back it explained some of the odd incidents I'd had in my life when I'd failed to recognise people I really should have. Face blindness can occur across a spectrum ranging from mild to severe and I'm closer to that end so it's quite surprising I didn't realise I had it sooner. Not long after I found out I had it, I witnessed an assault and I had to tell the police that while I could tell them exactly what happened before they got there, I couldn't tell them what the person who did it actually looked like (I knew who he was because I saw the police drag him off the victim, my information told them the assault was unprovoked). Needless to say, I got some very odd looks when I explained this to the officers who interviewed me. Luckily the guy pled guilty (this was because he didn't know I couldn't actually point at him in court and say 'he was the one that did it' – just knowing I'd seen what happened was enough), so it wasn't too much of a problem but it got me thinking that this could be an interesting premise for a story, especially if I took it to the extreme end of what might be possible. That was when I started wondering: what would happen if a crime was committed in a room full of people like me with fairly severe prosopagnosia? How would the police ever track down who did it when all their procedures are based around making an identification from facial features?

If you want to test your facial recognition abilities or to find out more about prosopagnosia, visit <http://www.faceblind.org/>.